Integrity Impugned

By David Maister

Because of prior poor experiences - or the generally bad caricatures that exist about many professions - clients are often suspicious (at least initially) of the motives of their service providers.

Just think of the many jokes about consultants who act as if they are more concerned about looking for the next follow-on assignment to cross-sell than doing the current one well; lawyers who are suspected of running up the billable hours because they are paid by the hour; and advertising agency people who are more concerned with winning prizes than selling the client's product or service.

Whatever your profession, you need to be prepared for the fact that, at the beginning of every new relationship, you must avoid confirming other people's (inevitable) starting suspicions about your motives, and must actively work to demonstrate that you are, in fact, unlike the providers that the client may have experienced before.

This is not easy. It turns out that it is not enough just to *be* trustworthy. You must also know how to give the client the *experience* that you are visibly, obviously, trustworthy.

The Incident

The need to learn how to do this was brought home to me by a dramatic incident that happened at the start of my consulting career - thirty years ago.

I had been hired to help the executive committee of a major consulting firm in formulating their strategy. There were eight or ten senior officers of the firm around the table.

As I was generating various options for them to consider, the CEO suddenly said to me (in front of everyone else): "You're not really trying to help us. You just want to see us change so you can get consulting fees."

I had no idea what to say, and so said nothing. I was hugely offended. It's one thing to dislike my ideas, but to question my ethics? Impugn my integrity?

The air hung heavy and silent until one of the other executives picked up the conversation and moved on.

I carried on working with that firm, through the term of my contract, and no-one ever referred to the CEO's remarks again.

The silent approach worked that time, but it is not clear that it's always the best way to handle confrontational challenges. What *should* you say or do when someone accuses you of only being in it for yourself?

When I wrote about this (now ancient) story on my blog in 2006, it elicited more responses than almost any other topic I have "blogged" about. As one of my correspondents said - "Here's a topic we can all relate to."

Apparently, confrontational challenges from clients (perhaps not of this precise form, but in the same "Gotcha!" category) are still quite common.

No matter what your profession, you too, are highly likely to encounter something like this suspicion and distrust in your career. How well will you be prepared to handle the situation?

Why He Did It

In order to figure out the right thing to do or say in situations such as these, it's worth taking the time to try and speculate on what a client executive might be really trying to say if he or she were to challenge *your* motives in this way.

Among the possibilities are:

- The person has had bad experiences with previous service providers. He (or she) isn't really reacting to anything you've done or said, but is showing his or her general view of outsiders.
- It could be a method of "testing" you to see how you react. (Yes, clients do that – quite frequently.) The client could plan to base his or her judgment of your motives (and skills) on the way you handle yourself.
- The client might be (appropriately?) annoyed at the person who had brought you in, possible because they had not engaged in the proper consultation and prior approval process. The "complaint" is expressed as if it's about you, but it might really be aimed at someone else in the room.
- The client might just be asserting his or her power, sending a signal to you, the outsider, the person who invited you to the meeting (and, of course, everyone else!)
- It could mean nothing more than the fact that the client is the kind of person who has a generally combative shoot-from-the-hip approach.
- The client might be truly worried about past and current change-related initiatives – exactly what he or she is talking about – and is truly trying to address the issue of the need for change.
- It is also possible that the client is reacting to some (hopefully incorrect and unconscious) signal that you have sent that you do, indeed, have your own best interests at heart, not the client company's.

That's an incomplete but nevertheless wide range of possibilities, each requiring, if true, a different response. (What else do *you* think might be among the possible explanations for the comment and behavior of a client in a situation like this?)

In a perfect world, as soon as you are challenged in this way at a meeting, you would have the presence of mind (and mental agility) to diagnose immediately *why* the CEO said what he did – which of the possibilities above were actually the case. You could then proceed appropriately.

But only a few of us are born with that skill. The rest of us probably need to prepare for such situations, and think ahead (if at all possible) about what we might say and do that would shed some light on the situation. How do you find out what's really going on?

Say Nothing?

I have asked many people in my seminars (and participants on my blog) what they would have said in response.

Some people think the best strategy would be to say nothing. They suggest that one should just let the comment hang in the air, and let everyone in the meeting feel the discomfort created by the challenger's remark — while managing your own discomfort. If no one else in the room "takes the bait," then you would still have choices left.

This is a tempting option. In an ideal world, of course, someone else would soon leap to your defense, saying something like: "I've known this person for a long time, and he/she is not like that."

But you can't bank on that happening! (In fact, in my experience, the odds are low that it will.)

Other people would argue that, when awkward situations like this arise, you need to "survive" until the nearest coffee break, lunch break or end-of-day adjournment, and find a way to ask each person one-on-one (in confidence:) "What just happened there? Is that a real issue?"

Back in the days when I was a smoker, I could do this on the pavement outside the building or wherever we sinners were banished to. I've had more than my fair share of hushed bathroom conversations, too.

It is also an option to try to have a closed-door one-on-one discussion with the "challenger" himself (or herself) after the meeting. That would take courage, but at least there would be a chance of resolving the issue (and beginning a more constructive relationship) in a calmer setting.

Reinforcing the temptation to do nothing is the theory that, if you were to react directly and perpetuate a discussion of your motives, it would only serve to reinforce the topic of your ethics, potentially turning it into a real issue.

Among the many goals you might have in figuring out a response, one of the most important is to avoid derailing your discussion of the issues.

Possible Responses

But doing absolutely nothing clearly isn't right, either. At that very moment, it might be tempting to shrink into a small, invisible ball, but that is unlikely to be very helpful.

What response *could* you give if someone challenged your motives in the way described in my story? When I have posed this question to various groups, the suggestions have included replies such as these:

- "If you're not comfortable with me, then that's completely fine. Nice to meet you and all the best for the future."
- "I don't fully know about your *past* experiences with consultants, but *I* have your best interests at heart."
- "I will do right by you, because it's much more important to me that you be successful and that I can build a long term relationship with your firm, as well as use you as a reference to help me grow my business."
- "A few more billable hours don't mean much to me. I've got a full plate as it is. My success is driven only by your success."
- "You *don't* need me. However, as you know, my work comes with a guarantee. I'm clearly happy for you to decide whether it has been worthwhile and

whether or not you want to pay me."

- "I understand if you don't want to, and that's fine - we're all busy people, so just let me know either way and we can get on with our day."
- "I only work with clients who provide me with real, as opposed to manufactured, challenges. Generating fake work for the sake of a quick buck wouldn't actually benefit either of us, would it?"
- "I know this is always a major concern when working with consultants and I thank you for addressing this concern. Let us invest a few minutes to visualize the benefits we want to obtain for your company in this process."
- "That's not how I operate. If you really believe that, then let me give you a last piece of advice - for free: find an advisor you trust."
- "It's my role only to help provide options and create ideas. I'm not here to make decisions for you or to force you into anything"

What do you think? Do you think any of those responses would have "worked?" If not, what would *you* have considered saying at that precise moment?

Notice how easy it would have been to turn the CEO's comment into an argument, with you and your challenger immediately being on opposite sides. Many of the possibilities given above are both contentious - implicitly or explicitly – and defensive.

And by making it a contest, you almost certainly will lose.

Another Approach

It's worth reflecting on the fact that, at least in the situation I have described, the CEO didn't ask a question. He made a statement, one that was possibly (maybe even probably) addressed as much to the whole room as it was to me.

You could argue that, in situations like these, your integrity hasn't really been impugned. It has just been challenged. It is up to you to demonstrate that you can deal with the challenge and then move on. The key here would be to find a way to *demonstrate* integrity, rather than react to the fact that your pride has been wounded.

If you are capable of it, probably the wisest and most effective way to respond would have been to exhibit a calm demeanor that truly deflected the attack, without taking it personally and without any attempt to defend yourself. (Not easy!)

On my blog, Johnnie Moore commented: "I've been practicing doing this when someone says something surprising (pleasant or not) and I'm not sure what to say. I simply invite them to say more. 'That's interesting. Could you say a little more about that?' This acknowledges the person instead of defending; gives me a little time to think; and often elicits more information. "

Another approach would be to ask the CEO if he or she wants to pursue this topic *right now*. That way, if he or she is just trying to rattle you and has no substance, he or she has an easy way out. If you were to start by questioning him when he was only "joking" or testing, then you put him or her on the defensive. Since he or she can't lose face in front of his subordinates, that's a bad outcome.

If the CEO wanted to talk about it right now, then you could ask for more information about the issues. You could try and shift your role from “advisor” to “facilitator”, by asking whether or not *he* or *she* sees a need for changes, and then asking for other people’s reactions to his comments.

The key here is to stay focused on the problem and the proposed solution - shifting the conversation away from discussing you, and back to discussing the issues.

Attempting to justify yourself will never work. It’s better just to act as if your challenger couldn't possibly be questioning your integrity.

Another approach would be to try to make sure that the responsibility for dealing with the CEO's statement is shared by everyone in the meeting, not just you.

You could ask all the other executives, “Is this an issue that this group is concerned about? If so, should we discuss it before we go any further?”

That would give the other executives the opportunity to express either their agreement with the CEO's sentiments or their assurance that they have no such concerns. And you will get a chance to see which way the wind is blowing.

This approach can, however, be risky. You would have to worry about whose side the rest of the executive committee would be on if you tried to make the case for your honest intentions.

Would they support him – or you? In general, the odds are against you. Even if they don’t distrust your motives, why should they take the side of the outsider in an open discussion?

Worse, what if everyone *did* feel the same way as the CEO, or even worse again, took his side so as to not offend *him*?

From that point of view, perhaps the *last* thing you really want to do is pose the question to the group in real time. Their answers are highly likely to be driven by appearance, politicking and positioning.

Rehearsing

Hard as it is to figure out the right thing to do and to say in situations such as these, it can be even harder to use the right tone and body language that accomplishes the goal that you have.

There is a paradox here. You cannot be convincing about your trustworthiness simply by asserting it (“I’m trustworthy – honestly!”) Accomplishing the goal of being trusted means that we must learn how to handle ourselves in ways that people actually experience our sincerity and integrity.

But to pull this off, we may need help not only with finding the right words, but also with the process of becoming self-aware of our non-verbal body-language. For most people, it will be necessary to rehearse reacting to suddenly challenging situations in order to ensure that they, indeed, come across to others as they wish to come across.

Consider, for example, the advice given above to “let the (challenging) comment hang in the air, and let everyone feel the discomfort — while managing your own discomfort.”

This is not a simple thing to do. How does one learn to manage one’s own discomfort? Situations like these call for what I call “adrenalin control” – the ability to control one’s own reactions, behavior body language and even breathing so that you can respond in a way that accomplishes what you intend.

The most important thing to realize about situations like these is that when they occur, we rarely have the self-control to think and react rationally and thoughtfully. In a very real sense, we are put into a state of shock.

If you are the kind of person who has a track record of picking up on social clues, staying calm in the face of challenge, saying what you mean to say just as you're saying it, then obviously *you* don't need rehearsal. (But – boy! - am I jealous of you!)

Diffusing an emotional situation is never easy, and few of us know exactly how to do it. Even those who can are not always able to describe *how* they do it.

Other people need practice and tips on these things. I think helping "non-naturals" with their emotional skills (or whatever you want to call it) is an important thing that firms can help their people with (at any age.)

Some people have a concern that it might be artificial to try to anticipate situations such as these, and to have a pocket full of what they (pejoratively) call "semi-canned responses."

Personally, I think there is no inherent virtue in trying to "think on your feet" if you are not very good at it. Planned responses are a huge problem if your intent is to mislead. But good intentions alone do not mean that you will succeed in leaving the right impression. You need to ensure that you know how to exhibit (not just possess) trustworthiness.

Naturally, there can be a risk that over-rehearsing leads to focus on "the performance" rather than conveying your sincerity. The question of which is the bigger risk (over-rehearsing and being phony or under-rehearsing and being unprepared) comes down to each person's interpersonal and social skills.

This is, I believe, an important topic, often neglected in professional firm training. In discussing these issues in my seminars and presentations, it is commonly reported that many people feel that a majority of their client "failures" have come from getting the emotional / interpersonal tone wrong.

The simple fact is that no-one ever taught us how to come across as trustworthy. No-one ever prepared us for events such as clients who challenge our motives.

You may not have an experience exactly like mine, but the odds are high that you will be faced with some kind of "Gotcha!" challenge from one of your clients – something that will catch you unawares.

The good news is that the skills are learnable. It is possible, with guided practice and experience, to understand how you come across to others, and to learn how to handle yourself well in stressful client situations. Experience helps – but so does thinking ahead and anticipating awkward situations that might – and probably will – happen to you.

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My thanks go to the many participants in my seminars and blog who joined in the discussions on this topic (**http://davidmaister.com/blog/184/**)

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